"This Place has History Like Ghosts":

The NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre, Montreal

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Prologue

I have never been inside the Negro Community Centre (NCC) in the neighbourhood of Little Burgundy, Montreal. My personal knowledge of the building is limited to the exterior: the texture of the crumbling façade, and the deep pits and crevices left behind by large pieces of fallen stone, which are large enough for birds to nest in. I know the grasses and small wild flowers that grow on the windowsills in the summer, and how large icicles partially obscure the broken windows in the winter. I have peered through all of the windows on the ground level, and seen the floor scattered with boxes and paper, the paint peeling off of the walls, and a chair eerily placed at the bottom of a stairwell, looking as though someone just got up to check something in the other room. I have pressed my face against the metal mesh on the windows and breathed in the cold, damp, moldy air as I stood waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness inside of the building, trying to glimpse something of the mystery of its interior.

I went to local historian, Dorothy W. Williams to understand what was inside this beautiful and imposing structure.[1] Williams has published two groundbreaking books on the history of the Black community in Montreal.[2] She is also particularly well situated to speak about the NCC; not only was she the director of the centre in the 1980s, she was also born and raised in Little Burgundy and says that she practically grew up in the NCC. Williams helped me to construct drawings on the NCC's interior based on her memories of the space, which she last entered almost a decade ago (Fig. 1 through 4).

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[1] Dorothy W. Williams and I met on April 30, 2009. All of the information in this prologue is based on that conversation.

[2] Dorothy W. Williams, *Blacks in Montreal 1628-1986: An Urban Demography*. (Cowansville, QC: Editions Yvon Blais, 1989) and *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997).

The main entrance to the NCC is on the south façade of the building, but children never used that set of double doors. They entered by the east door, and race up the steps past the receptionist who would yell at them to walk, not run, on the stairs.[3] They would slow down for a few steps, until the receptionist was just out of sight, and then resume their former speed until they reached the second or third floor. Williams recalled how cavernous the space of the first floor felt. She estimated that the ceiling in that open room was 12 feet high, based on her memory of holding another child on her shoulders so that she could reach the base of one of the windows. She remembered how as teens they had to call out to each other across the vastness of the activities room on the third floor to be heard, and how their voices seemed to get lost as they echoed off of the walls and ceiling. Her memory of the dimensions of the nine concrete support columns on each floor was corporeal, based on how far she could reach around each when she hugged them as a child. Williams spoke of the diffuse sunlight from the glass block windows in the gym that would reach her eyes as she watched basketball games from the mezzanine seating. As Williams helped me to reconstruct the NCC floor plans she frequently had to stand up, close her eyes, and step into the spaces in her memory, physically situating her body in relation to each space in the centre, as she had moved through them from her childhood in the 1950s until the 1990s when the building closed. This paper would not be possible without Williams' embodied and situated memory of the NCC.

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[3] Dorothy Williams, personal interview, April 30, 2009.

The Negro Community Centre

I first encountered the Negro Community Centre (NCC) in the summer of 2008 when I began working at a public library in Little Burgundy.[4] A few times a week, I would go out to visit a handful of neighbourhood daycares, passing by the building on the corner of Coursol and Canning Streets on my way (Fig. 5). The NCC is located on the northwest corner of Campbell Park, a central hub of the neighbourhood where, on any given day, you can see a cross-section of Little Burgundy's residents – seniors sitting on benches, teens on the basketball court or smoking in the bleachers, a diverse (ethnically, linguistically, economically) group of kids playing in the playground – all crossing paths in this green space. In this highly visible location on the periphery of the park, the NCC stands out. It is a big, old stone church in a sea of mid to late twentieth-century town houses, and low-rise apartment buildings, broken up by a few blocks of brick and stone Victorian homes that were spared the ravages of urban renewal in the late 1960s.

My first encounter with the NCC triggered a series of questions. Why had this community centre closed? How had the building fallen into ruin? And what community did the centre serve, back in the 1920s, when it was founded? At that point, like most Montrealers, I knew little about Little Burgundy, or the history of Montreal's Black community. Historian Dorothy Williams has characterized Montreal's Black history as the story "of a people whose history has been ignored, deliberately omitted, or distorted."[5] The common city biography of Montreal has overlooked and excluded Black

[4] The present day boundaries of Little Burgundy are Rue Guy to the east, Rue Atwater to the west, Rue St. Antoine to the north, and the Lachine Canal to the south.

[5] Williams, *Road to Now*, 14.

Montrealers. Through my research on the NCC I wanted to understand the history of the community that I was now serving in my library.

To position myself in relation to this project, I would like to make it clear thatin many ways I write as an outsider. Little Burgundy is not my community and Montreal's Black history is not my history. In this essay, then, I do not attempt to speak for people from the community, which is always a risk when writing about peoples who have been marginalized and silenced. What I feel is a bigger risk is to not speak about Montreal's Black community because of fear of overstepping some ill-defined boundary. While many histories of discrimination are framed as the stories of the oppressed, they are as much the stories of the oppressors. White scholars' silence on Black history in this city has meant that "the historical record remains silent, causing Montreal's Black population to be invisible even today."[6]

In her book, *The Power of Place*, architectural historian Dolores Hayden describes the reading of public history in the built landscape as a process of uncovering "the story of how places are planned, designed, built, inhabited, appropriated, celebrated, despoiled, and destroyed."[7] As I write this in the spring of 2009, the NCC is completely boarded and locked up. I have been unable to enter the building so, in my research, I have considered the NCC as a palimpsest based primarily on physical traces that are visible from the structure's exterior. In this paper I explore five distinct elements of the building: its original form as a church, the sign that hangs over the front door, the boxy fourth floor addition, the reconstructed back wall, and the mural that covers the plywood barring the

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[6] Williams, *Road to Now*, 13.

[7] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 15.

entrance. I use these elements to draw out the story of the NCC's past as an institution at the heart of a community, its present state as an all-but-abandoned building in ruin, and its possible future as the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. In seeking to understand the importance of this site, I turn to Dolores Hayden, who describes the power of place as "the power of ordinary landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory."[8] I want to understand how the new NCC, as envisioned by the Centre's board of directors, could respect the site as a memory place, and by connecting Black Montrealers with their community memories, reconnect them with their long history in this city.

Church

Although a series of modifications has been made to the NCC over the years, it is evident that the building was originally a church (Fig. 6). The building was designed by Sidney Rose Badgley (1850-1917), a Canadian architect born in St. Catharines, Ontario. Badgley trained in Toronto before moving in 1877 to Cleveland, Ohio, where he established a firm with William H. Nicklas. While his most significant architectural contributions were Toronto's Massey Hall (1894) and Wesleyan University's Slocum Hall in Ohio (1898), the majority of his designs were for churches built throughout Canada and the United States between 1877 and 1915.[9]

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[8] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 9.

[9] "Sidney Badgley."

The NCC building was erected as the West End Methodist Church in 1890. The three-story, 75 x 165' Romanesque Revival building stood at 1 Coursol Street. The grey ashlar masonry exterior was embellished with belt courses and rounded-window arches of darker brown stone. The front façade featured a rose window over the deep arched entrance, and to the right was a bell tower, which rose above the building's pitched roofs. The style of this structure was typical of many of Badgely's churches, and bore a striking resemblance to his Centenary Methodist Church in nearby Pointe-Saint-Charles, which had been erected a year earlier. In fact these two churches were so similar that the Bibliothèque et Archives Nationale du Québec have mistakenly identified historic photographs of the Centenary Methodist as the West End Methodist in their collection (Fig. 7).

The West End Methodist Church was a place of worship for the St. Antoine district's poor and working-class residents. In the early to mid-nineteenth century St. Antoine Street had been home to some of Montreal's well-to-do professionals. But with the advent of the Grand Trunk Railway in 1956, the opening of the Lachine Canal in 1825, and the subsequent boom of industry, the working class filtered into the neighbourhood, and the wealthy moved up the hill to the Golden Square Mile. The former mansions were divided into flats and rooms by real estate companies and rented to the primarily Irish and British workers and their families.[10]

[10] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 24-25.

The building operated as the West End Methodist Church until 1926, with a brief closure when, in December 1914, a fire ravaged the building on Christmas day (Fig. 8).[11] The damages were repaired and the building continued to serve as a Methodist Church until 1927, when it became the West End United Church for two years. In 1929 the building became the Iverley Settlement House. The social settlement movement began in Britain in the 1880s when members of the university-educated middle class, established and lived in settlement houses in urban slums. Women headed the majority of houses, with the exception of the university settlements, which were established by university men.[12] The settlement movement's aim was to bridge the gap between the upper and lower classes. By taking up residence in poor neighbourhoods, the privileged workers could learn more about the realities of urban poverty, and the poor whom they served could benefit from their exposure to middle-class values.[13] These settlement workers offered services to the houses' "neighbours," as the settlements' primarily poor, working class and immigrant users were known, to address "a variety of concerns related to urbanization and industrialization, education and health, immigration and poverty, democracy and reform."[14] The settlement movement expanded to the United States in the 1890s, and to Canada in the 1900s.[15] Unlike the American and British settlements, which were in most instances nonsectarian, many Canadian houses were closely related to Christian denominations and churches. This was the case with the Iverley Settlement,

[11] All of the dates in this paragraph are from *Annuaires Lovell*.

[12] Stebner, "Settlement House Movement," p. 1060.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p. 1059.

[15] Ibid., p.1067.

which was run by the Brewery Mission in the adapted church space.[16] The popularity of the social settlement movement began to wane around the time of WWII, and many houses became community centres. In 1938 the Iverley Settlement became the Iverley Community Centre, and remained so until 1955.

Sign

Above the arched front entrance hangs an old and slightly battered wooden sign (Fig. 9). Hand-painted grey lettering on a pale green background reads, "Negro Community Centre Inc. Established 1926. Centre Communautaire des Noires Inc." The organization was in fact established in 1927 as the Negro Community Association, by the Rev. Charles H. Este and his parishioners of the Union United Church. The stated aim of the organization was, "to alleviate social and economic conditions amongst Blacks in Montreal."[17]

Black people have lived in Montreal for nearly 400 years, since the first African slaves were brought to New France in 1628.[18] Canadians have tended to ignore this chapter in our history, preferring the narrative of Canada as the last stop on the Underground Railroad, and the land of freedom for escaped American slaves. In fact the first Underground Railroad flowed south, and from 1788 to 1792 brought Canadian-held slaves to the free northern states.[19] The African slave trade in Quebec didn't develop to

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[16] *Annuaires Lovell*.

[17] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history.htm (accessed February 12, 2009).

[18] Williams, *Road to Now*, 17.

[19] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal,* 13.

the same extent as in the southern states, primarily because the northern landscape and climate didn't support the development of a plantation-based agricultural economic system.[20] Furthermore, in Quebec there were two classes of slaves: less expensive (and therefore more expendable) aboriginal Panis slaves, who did hard manual labour, and African slaves who worked mostly as domestic servants, frequently in cities, and were considered status symbols.[21] The Church encouraged manumission, and so from 1628 to 1834, when slavery was officially abolished in the British Empire, there were many free Blacks living in Montreal as well.[22]

There are very few historical records of Black Montrealers after 1834. Dorothy Williams assumes that there was a handful of isolated Black families living scattered around the island, and that, "the situation remained this way until after 1897, when an identifiable 'Negro' community came into being on the island of Montreal."[23] This was, for the most part, due to the development of the Grand Trunk Railway, which by the mid-1800s had connected Montreal to major American cities like Chicago.[24] The American Pullman Palace Car Company hired Black American men to work as sleeping car porters, waiters and cooks. These men tended to maintain homes in the United States, while using Montreal only as a temporary home for stopovers. This changed when the

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[20] Williams, *Road to Now*, 22.

[21] Williams, *Road to* Now, 21.

[22] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 11. Many who have acknowledged the legacy of slavery in Canada have portrayed the Canadian practice as somehow less brutal or more "humanitarian" than the American version; see Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, p.10. I would agree with Williams that there isn't any humane way for one human being to own another as property.

[23] Williams, *Road to Now*, 17.

[24] Ibid., 32.

Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railways, following the lead of the Pullman Palace Car Company, began hiring exclusively Black porters to staff their sleeping cars, and to work as Red Caps, carrying baggage in the stations.[25] Initially they hired Black Americans, but by 1897 they were hiring Canadians and recruiting directly from the West Indies.[26] These new residents settled in the St. Antoine district. This neighbourhood "below the hill" became home to the vast majority of Montreal's Blacks because of its proximity to the railroad, cheap rent, and landlords who would accept non-White tenants.[27]

At the turn of the century, systematic racial discrimination was widespread. In response to this racist climate, the growing Black community on the island formed a handful of Black organizations.[28] The first such organization was the Coloured Women's Club of Montreal (CWCM), which was established in 1902 to "aid black people in Montreal in every way possible."[29] The CWCM was the first women's club in Canada, and their charitable services and activities, which responded to pressing needs in the community, included a clothing depot for the poor, maintaining a burial plot in the Mount Royal Cemetery, babysitting and homecare for working mothers, and a soup kitchen, to name a few.[30] The women from the CWCM were instrumental in starting the Union United Church (UUC) in 1910. Before the founding of the UUC, Black Montrealers

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[25] Ibid., 34.

[26] Williams, *Road to Now*, 22.

[27] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 25.

[28] Williams, *Road to Now*, 38.

[29] Ibid., 50.

[30] Pauline Paris, "Black Montrealers."

attended Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Methodist services in White churches, often in the face of discrimination and blatant hostility from the White parishioners.[31] The UUC was not only as a place of worship for Black Montrealers of all denominations, but served as a base for many charitable activities and community initiatives.[32] In 1919 the members of the Universal Loyal Negroes Association established the Montreal branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association to promote a pan-African identity and segregation in order to uplift the race, ideals held by the association's founder, Marcus Garvey.[33] The last of this constellation of Black community organizations to form was the Negro Community Centre, in 1927. The NCC operated out of the Union United Church, Montreal's "Black church," which had been under the leadership of Rev. Este since 1925.[34] The NCC's activities "focused on legal, social, housing, employment issues, and immigration problems," a mandate that, "complemented the religious/social offerings of the church."[35]

Both the UUC and the NCC provided a space of unification for the Black community, which was often internally divided between Americans, Canadians and West Indians.[36] In a series of oral histories conducted by the Concordia Libraries, many Black Montrealers recalled the NCC at this time as a place where the community came together

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[31] Williams, *Road to Now*, 52-53.

[32] Ibid., 54-55.

[33] Bartley, *Universal Negro Improvement Association*.

[34] Thomas, Cynthia. "Rev. Charles H. Este," *NCC Newsletter #2*, http://www.nccmontreal.org/en/news02.htm (accessed March 24, 2009). The Union United Church is still offering services in the same location at the corner of Atwater and Delisle.

[35] Williams, *Road to Now*, 67.

[36] Ibid.

and found a sense of belonging in a city full of spaces where, though Montreal was not officially segregated, they were not welcome. Sharing a physical building, the church and the centre were linked. Pauline Paris, a long-time member of the NCC from the time of her childhood in the 1920s and 1930s, recalled of the weekly 10-cent dances, "if you could go to [the social] Saturday night, you had to go to church Sunday morning. There was no excuse, the two went together."[37]

Gymnasium

Approaching the corner of Canning and Coursol, one is presented with what looks like an old stone church that has sprouted a smooth concrete box from its roof (figs. 10 and 11). This fourth floor, added between 1955 and 1957,[38] is a gym constructed from covered cement bricks reinforced with steel columns and beams.[39] The Spancrete roof, covered with tar and gravel, which in contrast with the pitched roofs of the third floor is completely flat, enhances the visual strangeness of this addition.

After 27 years the NCC had outgrown the back rooms of the Union United Church and needed its own building. So in 1955 the NCC took over the Iverley Community Centre at 2035 Coursol.[40] There was a pattern of westward migration in St. Antoine. As the neighbourhood's White residents moved west towards Atwater and out of the neighbourhood to the suburbs, Black residents moved into the homes they had

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[37] Paris, "Black Montrealers."

[38] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history (accessed February 12, 2009).

[39] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre, *Restoration, Renovation and Redevelopment*, 7.

[40] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history.htm (accessed February 12, 2009).

vacated.[41] Following this pattern, the Iverley moved to Ville St. Laurent and the NCC's 9% Black membership merged with the Iverley's 100% White membership.[42] While the NCC physically took over the building in 1955, the Iverley remained the legal owner until 1965 when the deed was handed over to the NCC.[43]

The NCC had obtained its own building, a space that it owned and controlled. The move to 2035 Coursol had both political and functional implications. In the 1950s a minority of Black Montrealers owned property in the city, and even fewer in St. Antoine.[44] Ownership of the building meant that Blacks in the neighbourhood could lay a claim to a place, a claim that wasn't contingent on the will of government or city planners. It allowed for a level of self-determination. Dolores Hayden writes, "one of the consistent ways to limit the economic and political rights of groups has been to constrain social reproduction by limiting access to space."[45] Ownership of a building not only facilitates the production of social space, but also permits the creation of new physical spaces. bell hooks has pointed out that "wherever folks are dwelling in space, they can think creatively about the transformation and reinvention of that space."[46] While ownership is not a pre-requisite for transforming space, it does allow inhabitants to make modifications to the structures they inhabit, which cannot be made by renters. Such was

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[41] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 69.

[42] Williams, *Road to Now*, 101.

[43] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history.htm (accessed February 12, 2009).

[44] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 70.

[45] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 22.

[46] hooks, *Art On My Mind*, 156.

the case with the construction of the gym, which was a major modification to the building and catered to the NCC's needs.

The move to 2035 Coursol was also a separation from the Union United Church and marked the beginning of a period of increased activity and expanding services, as the NCC came into its own as a focal point of the community.[47] In 1949 Stanley A. Clyke, whose approach was influenced by the philosophy of progressive social work which he had studied at McGill University, assumed leadership of the centre.[48] The settlement house movement was also founded on the principles of progressive social work, and in fact the movement was directly involved in the professionalization of the field.[49] There are many interesting parallels between the activities and services offered by the NCC in the 1950s and 1960s and the building's previous life as the Iverley Settlement decades earlier. On the first floor the NCC provided music lessons, a sewing room, a kitchen, a library, and the Walker Credit Union. Situated on the second floor was the day nursery, a dance room where children took lessons in ballet and tap during the day, and was used for social dances at night, as well as a stage for performances. On the third floor there was a woodshop, and a home economics room, as well as a recreation space for teens with a bar and tables for ping-pong and pool. Finally, there was the gymnasium on the fourth floor, used for basketball and boxing.[50] In addition the NCC ran a dental clinic, and offered employment services and counseling. The NCC also shared the settlement's official

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[47] Dorothy Williams, personal interview, April 30, 2009.

[48] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history.htm (accessed February 12, 2009).

[49] Stebner, "Settlement House Movement," p. 1059.

[50] Dorothy Williams, personal interview, April 30, 2009.

position of openness to anyone, regardless of race, language or ethnicity,[51] although according to Eleanor Stebner, the theory of inclusiveness was not always put into practice in the settlements, and the decline of the movement was in part due to the workers' discomfort with Black neighbours.[52] The NCC differed from the settlement significantly in that the centre was not being controlled by professionals who had settled in a 'slum' in order to improve the lives of local residents; rather it was, for the most part, people from within the community working together to run their own centre.

While racism was still rampant in Montreal, the post-war period marked a time of expanding opportunities and an improved quality of life for many in the Black community.[53] Unlike during the First World War, Black men were allowed to join the Canadian Armed Forces in WWII and were eligible for the housing and education programs for returning veterans.[54] Labour shortages during the war had opened up new areas of employment, and for the first time Blacks were able to work in the fields in which they had trained. Finally, major victories had been won in the labour movement, including the unionization of the railway porters.[55] Many took the opportunity to move out of St. Antoine, to the South Shore, NDG, Lasalle, Ville St. Laurent, and Cotes-des-Neiges, but increased Black immigration kept numbers steady in the neighbourhood.[56]

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[51] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

[52] Stebner, "Settlement House Movement," p. 1066.

[53] Williams, *Road to Now*, 83. Black men were only able to join the armed forces after the community, lead by Rev. Este, formally protested the racist policies of the military in 1941.

[54] Ibid., 84.

[55] Williams, *Road to Now*, 89.

[56] Ibid., 95-97.

The 1960s "were the stage for phenomenal changes. Immigration from Black Third World countries soared. Cultural associations and human rights organizations proliferated. The relative standard of living, for a good number of Blacks, rose enormously. Intra-city mobility increased. And, amidst all of this was the destruction of the West End."[57] While the Civil Rights and Black Power movements were underway south of the border, a parallel yet independent movement in Montreal was ushering in a new politicized Black identity, particularly amongst young people and students.[58] A pivotal event in the Montreal community was the Computer Centre Riot at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia), in February 1969. In brief, Prof. Perry Anderson had been accused of unfair marking practices by a group of Black and White students. Unhappy with how the University dealt with the situation, about 200 students staged a sit-in for several days at the computer centre. The demonstration ended with the computer centre being destroyed, a fire, the police being called in, and 97 students being arrested, including 42 Black students.[59]

Initially the Black community rallied around and supported the students, but over time the events brought out tensions from within the community. These tensions played out at the NCC in 1970. A group of students who were part of the Black Action Party (BAP) had gotten involved with an afro-centric education program at the centre.[60] They

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[57] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 61.

[58] Williams, *Road to Now*, 108.

[59] Ibid., 120.

[60] Ibid., 127.

felt that the NCC's "inter-racial, integrationist stance"[61] was at odds with their Black Power politics. BAP demanded that the centre remove the two remaining White members from the board, and change the name to the "Community Centre," eliminating the word "negro" with its connotations of old-style inferiority. The proposal for a Black board was passed, but the membership would not agree to the name change, arguing that to change the name would erase the history of the centre and the community that created it. After this defeat, the BAP cut all ties with the NCC.[62]

The final and perhaps most significant event affecting the NCC and St. Antoine in this period was the aforementioned "destruction" of the West End. In the late 1960s the City of Montreal launched what they describe as, "un vaste programme de renovation urbaine et de construction de logements à loyer modique dans la Petite-Bourgogne".[63] In reality this "urban renewal" program saw the city, which had acquired over 75% of the land in St. Antoine, demolish large parts of the neighbourhood, displacing thousands of residents.[64] The city did eventually construct some social-housing projects, but in the intervening years many families had settled in other neighbourhoods, and never returned.[65] This project allowed for the construction of the Ville Marie Expressway through Little Burgundy, which effectively cut the neighbourhood off from downtown. Dolores Hayden asserts that, "decades of 'urban renewal' and 'redevelopment' of a

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[61] Ibid., 102.

[62] Ibid., 129.

[63] " … a large urban renovation program providing for the construction of low-income housing in Little Burgundy." "Secteur de valeur patrimoniale exceptionelle Coursol."

[64] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 72-73.

[65] Ibid.

savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated."[66] In Montreal, the city hoped that amongst these forgotten memories would be the stigma attached to St. Antoine, and to this end they christened the new, barely recognizable neighbourhood 'Little Burgundy.'[67] This story of displacement and destruction isn't unique to Montreal; there are similar stories in other Black communities in Canada – such as Africville in Nova Scotia – as well as in American cities like Macon, Georgia. In relation to Macon, Walter J. Hood and Melissa Erickson write that because of "the fragmentation caused by steady migration and uprooting, the Black cultural landscape today is represented by selective memories and histories drawn from artifacts left behind."[68] In Little Burgundy, the NCC is one such remaining artifact.

Back Wall

At the back of the building, the rough, crumbling, grey masonry of the façade gives way to the smoothness of cinder blocks (Fig. 12). The arched windows mirror the building's other three faces, but visible are the old decorative brown stones that once framed another set of windows, which begin their arc and then abruptly end. In 1987, after standing for almost 100 years, a section of the back wall collapsed.[69] During the

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[66] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 9.

[67] On p. 84 of *Blacks in Montreal*, published in 1986, Williams writes that in 1984 the City renamed Burgundy 'Quartier Georges Vanier' to leave behind the negative associations that Little Burgundy had accrued. She predicts that it will take a few years for the new name to catch on since people are reluctant to adopt new names, but apparently it never did stick.

[68] Hood and Erickson, *Storing Memories*, 182.

[69] Williams, *Road to Now*, 142.

repairs to the wall over the months that followed, the NCC reduced much of their programming.[70] At the same time their main funding source, Centraide (the Quebec branch of the United Way), was putting pressure on the board to redefine their mission in light of the changes that had occurred in the community.[71] By the mid-1980s a fraction of the Black community was still residing in Little Burgundy. The NCC had set up satellite centres in NDG and Cotes-des-Neiges and they were now in the position of having to justify duplicating services that were available in other districts.[72] The combination of funding cuts, depleted funds from the wall repair, and the pressing need for other major repairs to the 100-year-old building was disastrous for the centre. After the NCC released their employees in 1989, volunteers staffed the building until it closed in 1995. The remains closed at the time of this writing.[73]

Since its closure, the NCC's board has worked hard to raise the funds necessary to reopen the centre. There have been a number of hopeful announcements of the centre's reopening over the past 15 years, but each time they have been unable to meet the government's conditions for matching funds. Consequently each announcement has amounted to nothing.[74] In an interview, current NCC board member Lawrence Fraser told me that they had applied to the various levels of government to have the centre declared a heritage building. Official heritage status would have provided funds for the necessary

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[70] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. Our History. http://www.nccmontreal.org/ncc-eng-history.htm (accessed February 12, 2009).

[71] Dorothy Williams, personal interview, March 23, 2009.

[72] Williams, *Road to Now*, 142.

[73] Williams, *Road to Now*, 142.

[74] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

repairs to the building, but their applications were unsuccessful. "Because it was repaired by cinder blocks, a different material, it can no longer be considered a historic building."[75]

In 2004, following the *8th World Conference of Historical Cities* held in Montreal, the City appointed an advisory group to create a new heritage policy. The new policy defines heritage as "any asset or group of assets, natural or cultural, tangible or intangible, that a community recognizes for its value as witness to history and memory, while emphasizing the need to safeguard and protect it, make it their own, develop it and disseminate it."[76] This open definition, with its emphasis on the "living, human dimension of heritage"[77] would seem to favour institutions like the NCC. Cast in this light, the cinder block repairs to the back wall could be understood not as a violation of the building's historical integrity, but as a physical trace of the ongoing story of an active organization, with not only historic but also contemporary significance.

Yet the progressive approach to heritage put forth by the policy is not evident in the built heritage evaluations, initiated by the city in each of Montreal's boroughs in this same time period. The resulting *Évaluations du patrimoine urbain*, published for each borough in 2005, were meant to be comprehensive in identifying "les immeubles de valeur patrimoniale exceptionelle" [buildings of exceptional heritage value].[78] As Dolores Hayden has pointed out, the traditional attitude toward heritage focuses on architectural

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Ville de Montreal, *Directional Statement*, 2.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ville de Montreal, *Évaluation du patrimoine*, 54.

monuments: "authentic" historic buildings that provide examples of stylistic excellence in architecture, as opposed to vernacular "building types—such as tenement, factory, union hall, or church—that have housed working people's everyday lives."[79] With the exception of a number of manufacturing buildings of significance to the neighbourhood's industrial heritage, the *Évaluation* for Little Burgundy privileges the architectural style of buildings over their social or political significance. Typical of the document's tone is the description of Coursol Street with "le magnifique alignement de petites maisons victoriennes unifamiliales en série de deux étages au décor très élaboré de la rue Coursol suit la courbour de la rue et le rend d'autant plus pittoresque" [the magnificent row of small, single family, two-story Victorian houses with elaborate decoration, following the bend of Coursol, making the street very picturesque].[80]

Nowhere in the 100-page evaluation of the *arrondissement Sud-Ouest* is there any indication that Little Burgundy was the historic home of Montreal's Black community. It is presented as a neighbourhood where, "les Irlandais catholiques donnent une couleur particulière au Sud-Ouest" [Irish Catholics have leant their particular colour to the South-West].[81] The document's *historique* tells the story of a neighbourhood inhabited by a diverse population of French Canadians, Irish Catholics and British Protestants during the second half of the nineteenth century, where nothing of note happened in the twentieth century except for the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959. 2035 Coursol is briefly mentioned but not as a Black community centre: "on trouve aussi, près de

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[79] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 11.

[80] Ville de Montreal, *Évaluation du patrimoine,* 33.

[81] Ibid, 22.

l'extrémité est de la rue Coursol, l'église Méthodiste construite en 1890" [one also finds, near the far eastern end of Coursol Street, the Methodist Church built in 1890].[82] Published in 2005, the *Évaluation* is a contemporary example of how Black Montrealers have been, and continue to be, erased from the official narrative of the city.

Mural

Today, 2035 Coursol is completely boarded up. Wire mesh covers the broken windows, and some of the empty panes have been boarded (Fig. 13). The spring melt has exposed the surrounding sidewalk, scattered with pieces of shingle and bits of stone, which have crumbled from the building over the past winter. Peering through the windows, you can see that paper, garbage, and broken glass are scattered all over the floor, which has buckled from the moisture that invaded the building through broken windows and holes in the roof (Fig. 14). The building would seem to be completely abandoned, except for a colourful mural painted on the plywood that covers the front entrance, evidence that someone is tending to the place (Fig. 15). But in an anonymous act of violence, the figures on both sides have been obliterated with splashes of grey paint, and the image of Rev. Este in the centre has a grey painted moustache, and a swastika of dripping yellow foam insulation across his face.

The original mural was an initiative of the current board, which formed in 2004. Lawrence Fraser, who was involved in athletics at the NCC during his childhood and

[82] Ibid, 40.

teenage years in the 1960s and 1970s, joined the board after he participated in a community clean up of the NCC in 2004. He relayed the following story:

> we had a mural painted on the front doors of the building. I wanted the young artist who painted it to get a feel for the centre itself. The funny thing was, one of the people painted on the mural was Reverend Este … all I had was a one inch by one inch photograph of him, that was on a bulletin board with holes in it. As this woman was walking through the building she kept saying, "I can feel it." She painted this man so close to what he actually looked like, even though you couldn't really see him in the picture. It was just perfect.

Fraser told me that many people have had similar experiences in the building. He described the space as charged with a history that "has a feeling to it. You walk through it and you actually feel it. You can almost think that you can hear the people from the past talking in the building. The building has its own spirit."[83] In our conversation, Fraser painted a picture of a space that is haunted by the ghosts of its past, their presence signaled by absence, yearning to speak.

NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre

In 2004 a new board of directors formed and launched a major effort to expand membership and raise funds, with the renewed goal of reopening the NCC. They took the recommendations made by a city-funded feasibility study conducted in the year 2000, and worked with the urban planners at Convercité to create a $7,000,000 Restoration, Renovation, and Redevelopment plan for the centre.[84] The proposed centre will be called the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre, a name that was chosen when the NCC applied

[83] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

[84] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre, "*Restoration, Renovation and Redevelopment,*" ii.

to reinstate its non-profit status.[85] The new plan outlines major modifications to the building at 2035 Coursol (Fig. 16). The renovations will accommodate low-income seniors housing on the fourth floor and a community centre on the third floor. The second floor will be rented out to other non-profit organizations.[86] The first floor will house a kitchen, banquet hall, as well as a library and archive, which will maintain "an on-going collection of unique material about Blacks and by Black authors: material about what's going on in other Black communities, international material, literature, music, video footage, films, oral history tapes as well as computers."[87]

The new NCC will aim to serve all Little Burgundy residents, regardless of race, while at the same time promoting Montreal's Black culture and history for the wider community.[88] A few people in the community have voiced concern at the amount of rental space (housing, office and event) that has been allocated in the renovation plan.[89] The rental spaces reflect the board's desire to create an organization that will be financially self-sustaining, thus avoiding the complications of being dependent on grants and government funding. At the time of my interview with Fraser, in February 2009, the city had agreed to contribute $2,500,000 on the condition that additional funding can be secured from the province, and that a portion be raised within the community.[90]

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[85] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

[86] Ibid.

[87] NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre, "*Restoration, Renovation and Redevelopment,*" 9.

[88] Ibid., 5.

[89] *N.C.C. once The Heart Of A Communiy* Facebook group http://www.facebook.com/pages/Little-Burgundy-Montreal-Quebec/NCC-once-The-Heart-Of-A-Community/19253654182 (accessed April 24, 2009).

[90] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

Dolores Hayden contends that when the history of a community has been overlooked or forgotten we can turn to "the power of ordinary landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory."[91] The words that are not written in history books appear printed on the built landscape in a different form. Many in the community have forged meaningful attachments to the NCC. People refer to it as a second home.[92] Lawrence Fraser even compared the trauma of seeing the centre in ruin for the first time, after an absence of 25 years, to that of a hurricane victim finding their house destroyed.[93] On a Facebook fan page called *N.C.C. once The Heart Of A Communiy* [sic], community members have expressed sentiments such as, "ill never 4get that you could feel the sence of lost when it closed" [*sic*][94] and "the centre gave an alternative to hanging on the block and getting caught up in the street life … Plain and simple … THE NCC SAVED MY LIFE!!!!!!!"[95] Overall, people describe the centre as a warm place where everybody felt welcome, and where they were part of a community. These sentiments relate to the observations of Dolores Hayden, who asserts that "people invest places with social and cultural meaning, and urban landscape history can provide a framework for connecting those meanings into

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[91] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 9.

[92] Gyles, Shirley. "Second Home," *NCC Newsletter #2*, January 2006, http://www.nccmontreal.org/en/news02.htm (accessed March 24, 2009).

[93] Lawrence Fraser, personal interview, February 27, 2009.

[94] Omama, Marilyn, *N.C.C. once The Heart Of A Communiy* Facebook group, comment posted 1:32 a.m., August 8, 2009, http://www.facebook.com//pages/Little-Burgundy-Montreal-Quebec/NCC-once-The-Heart-Of-A-Community/19253654182 (accessed April 24, 2009).

[95] Dukes, Ron, *N.C.C. once The Heart Of A Communiy* Facebook group, comment posted 12:05 p.m., July 28, 2008, http://www.facebook.com/pages/Little-Burgundy-Montreal-Quebec/NCC-once-The-Heart-Of-A-Community/19253654182 (accessed April 24, 2009).

contemporary urban life."[96] The NCC, as a site that was woven into the lives of generations of Black Montrealers, could help to draw out people's individual and collective memories and connect them with the greater history of the Black community in the city.

For Dolores Hayden the "power of place" resides in the urban landscape's capacity to act as a storehouse for social memory. The new NCC will act as such a storehouse, quite literally, through its activities as an archive and library of local Black history. But it also has the potential to act as an archive in the less-tangible sense that Michel De Certeau and Luce Giard use the term. In their essay "Ghosts in the city," Certeau and Giard write: "gestures are the true archives of the city, if one understands by 'archives' the past that is selected and reused according to present custom."[97] Gestures are analogous to "intangible heritage," defined as, "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and know-how that communities and groups acknowledge as being part of their cultural heritage," emphasized by the city's heritage policy.[98] If the NCC reopens, a community of people will once again come together and enact the same gestures within the same walls, as generations before them. This continuity could potentially have a profound impact on Black Montrealers' sense of place in the past, present, and future of the city.

Gestures are the rituals of the everyday, and can bring the past to life in the present with an immediacy that is difficult to achieve with monuments and museums. Yet

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[96] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 78.

[97] Certeau and Girard, "Ghosts in the City," 142.

[98] Ville de Montreal, *Directional Statement*, 2.

it is often these two forms that communities turn to when they want to commemorate and conserve the past. I am not claiming that monuments are irrelevant, or that museums do not have a role to play in bringing histories to new publics, only that they are incomplete. Often their failing is in presenting histories, rife with contestation and competing narratives, as a single, linear narrative. As Mabel O. Wilson has pointed out, by trying to capture the whole story, "the museum unwittingly denies its public the possibility of articulating their own meanings and associations of this complex history."[99] Wilson goes on to argue that, "instead of allowing the past to rigidify in its monumental forms, we would vivify our memory through the memory-work itself."[100] This memory work is a conversation, an individual and collective working-out of a complex history. It is a negotiation that takes different shapes but always remains incomplete. Having been overlooked for so long, the story of Blacks in Montreal is yet unfixed. As a place where people would come together, the NCC could foster this ongoing conversation; a conversation with room for a diversity of voices that nurtures a rich, living history.

Living is narrativizing, as Certeau and Giard write, and it is through the stories that we tell each other and ourselves that we understand our pasts.[101] For people whose history has been neglected in the written record, storytelling has special significance. Dorothy Williams writes, "the oral history tradition is very much a part of the Black community in Montreal. Local historians and storytellers abound. These elders have within their memories precious familial and community information, that occasionally

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[99] Wilson, *Between Rooms 307*, 17.

[100] Ibid.19

[101] Certeau and Girard, "Ghosts in the City," 142.

they share with the younger generations."[102] Storytelling provides space for multiple historical narratives. As a practice, it connects the experiences of an individual with events on the larger scale. It is an active endeavor that places both speaker and listener in the position of making meanings from their memories. As the location of many memories, and as a social place where people would come together, the NCC would provide a space for storytelling.

Over the generations, communities leave their marks in the natural and built landscapes of the neighbourhoods where they reside. "The traces of time embossed in the urban landscape of every city offer opportunities for reconnecting fragments of the American [or Canadian] urban story,"[103] and careful renovation projects can work fruitfully with those traces. Of course renovation, as exemplified by the 1960s urban renewal project described earlier, can have the opposite effect. The process that I have been describing, whereby a building can trigger memories, involves the embodied memories of particular spatial arrangements. As I described at the beginning of this paper, Dorothy Williams demonstrated the role of embodiment in the process of recollection. As we mapped the arrangement of rooms, walls, doors, and stairs in the NCC, it was clear that her memories had taken on a distinctly spatial form.

In their renovation plan the NCC will have to be careful to preserve at least some of the spatial elements in the building, and not fall prey to the common "restoration" practice that preserves the original façade while completely gutting the interior of a building. The NCC would do well to heed Certeau and Giard's warning when they write,

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[102] Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, viii.

[103] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 13.

"renovation does not, ultimately, know what it is 'bringing back' – or what it is destroying – when it restores the references and fragments of elusive memories."[104] The restoration of the NCC has the potential to restore the references to memories held by those for whom the building has been a stage for many acts of their lives. The building cannot just look like the NCC on the outside, but also has to feel like the NCC on the inside. As illustrated by my conversation with Dorothy Williams, we know spaces through memories that are held deep in the body, and those memories can surface when our bodies move through and experience space in familiar ways.

Conclusion

As of this writing, the board of directors is pressing ahead to reopen the NCC, but they face many challenges. The NCC has been closed for 15 years, and at this point there is an entire generation that has grown up with the centre as a boarded-up building. These young people have to be convinced that the NCC would be a benefit to the community. Both Lawrence Fraser and Dorothy Williams expressed that, within the Black community, there are multiple racial and ethnic identities that extend beyond the simple category "Black." The NCC must now find a way, as they did in the centre's early years, to bridge these divides, particularly if they are going to be able to raise the necessary funds to complete the project.

Little Burgundy is changing, and the gentrification along Rue Notre-Dame is creeping northward. Hayden asserts, however "that urban landscape history can help to

[104] Certeau and Girard, "Ghosts in the City," 143.

reclaim the identities of deteriorating neighborhoods where generations of working people have spent their lives."[105] Hayden's assertion suggests that the type of community memory work that the NCC will encourage can form the basis for neighbourhood renewal, renewal that does not involve the displacement of long-time residents. Hayden continues, "it is the key to the power of historic places to help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present."[106] In present day Little Burgundy, the NCC is one of the few remaining architectural traces of the Black community's long history in Montreal. Lawrence Fraser told me, "the history in the building, it's like ghosts." I share the hope that the vision for the new NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre will be realized, and that the ghosts of history haunting the building find a voice for their stories.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dorothy Williams for speaking with me and for mapping out the floor plans for the building. Thanks also to Lawrence Fraser for his generous time, Amelia Robinson for editing, and Cynthia Hammond for her support and guidance.

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[105] Hayden, *Power of Place*, 43.

[106] Ibid, 46.

Figures

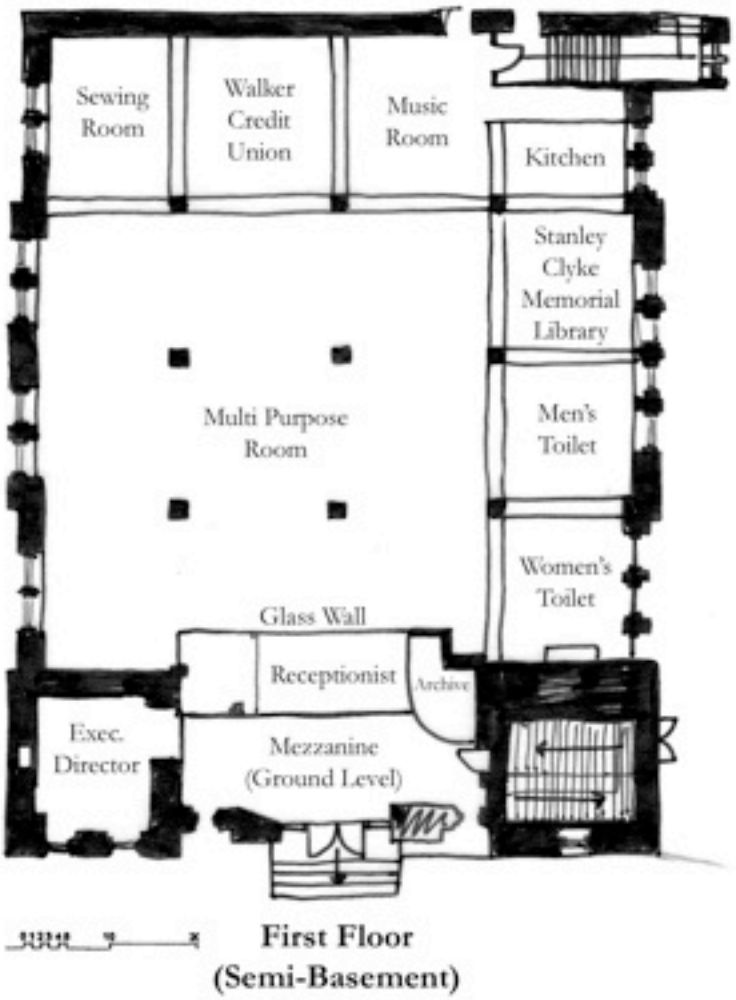

Figure 1. NCC, first floor.
Source: Based on information from Dorothy Williams, drawn by Adrienne Connelly.

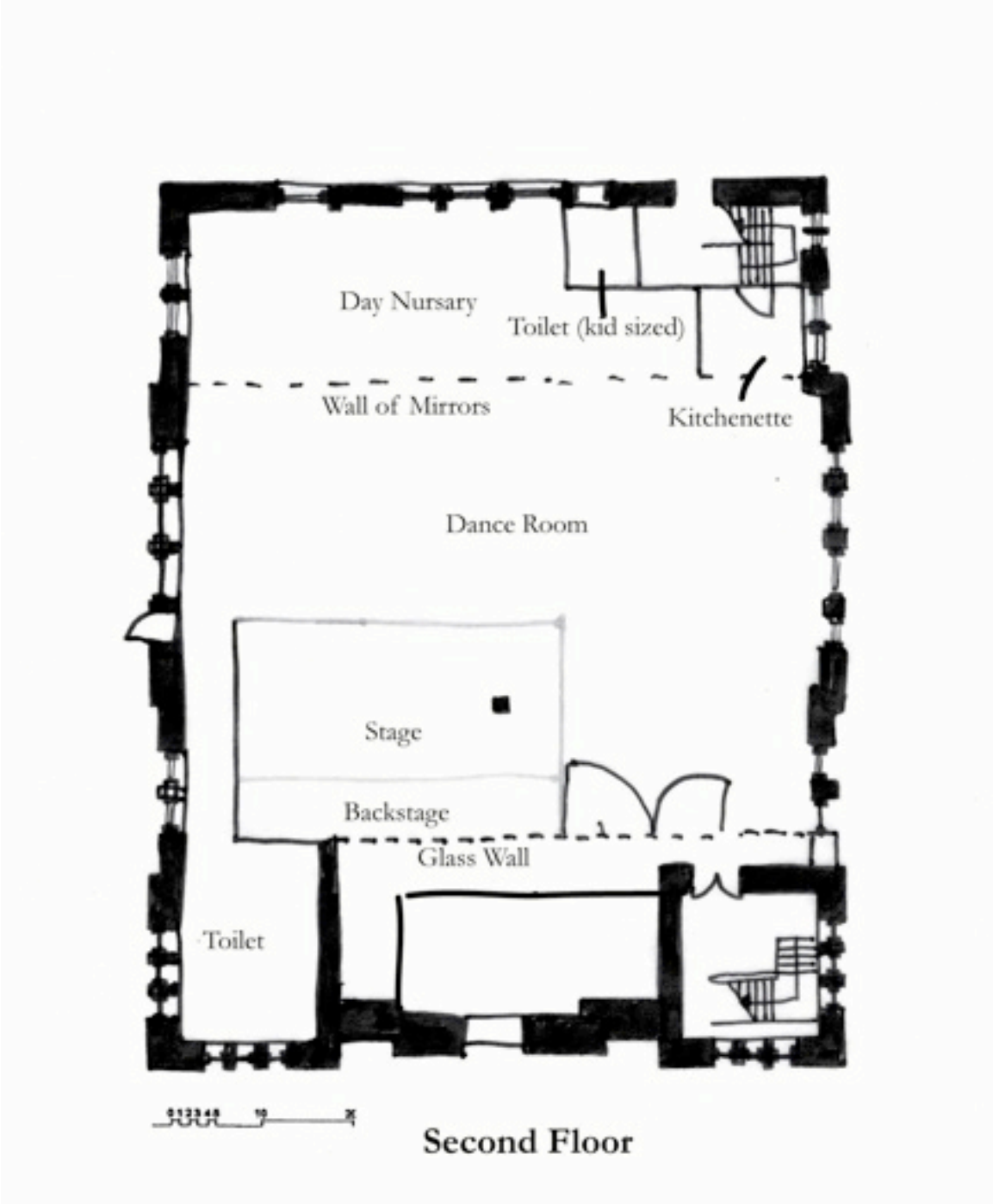

Figure 2. NCC, second floor.
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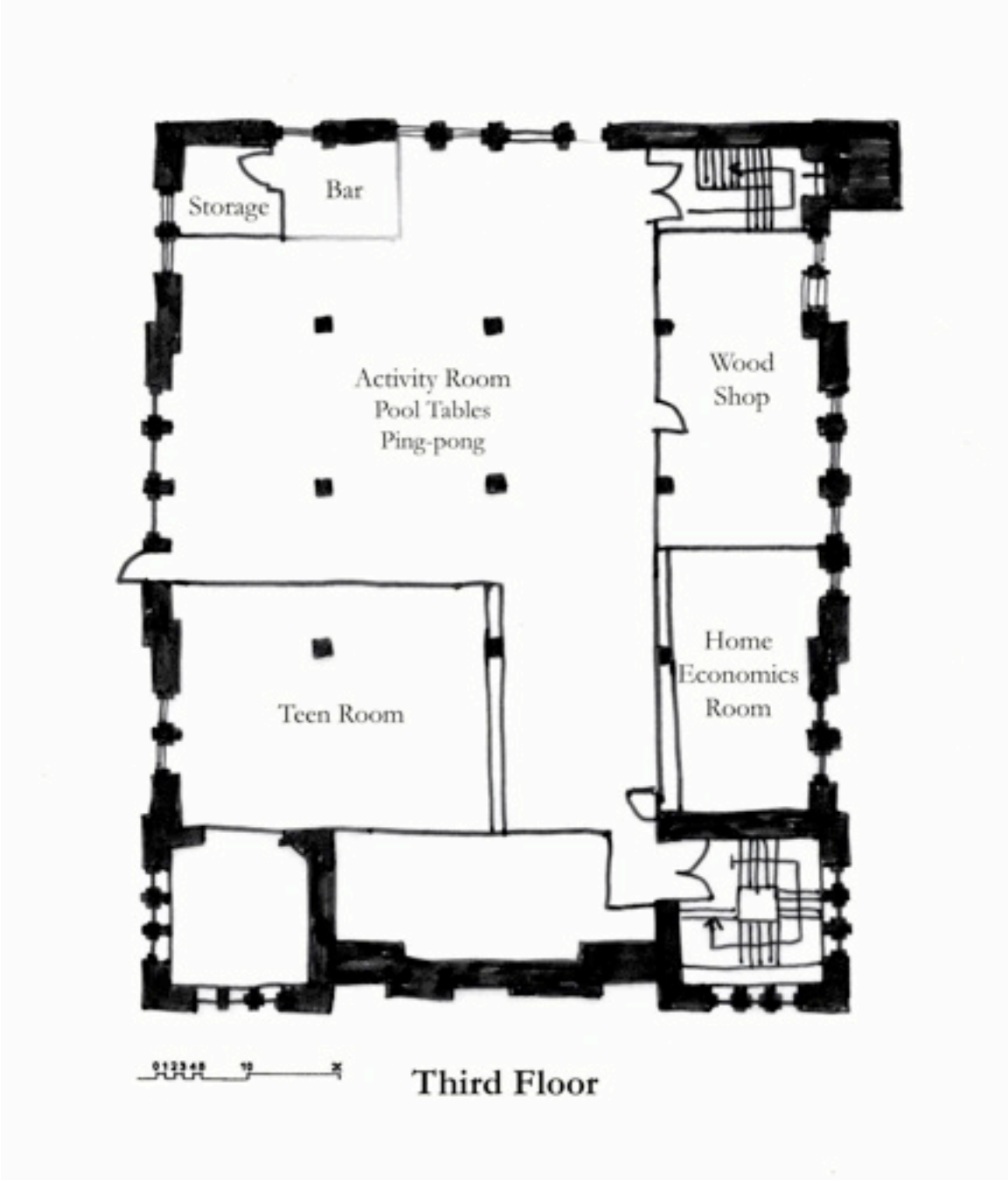

Figure 3. NCC, third floor.
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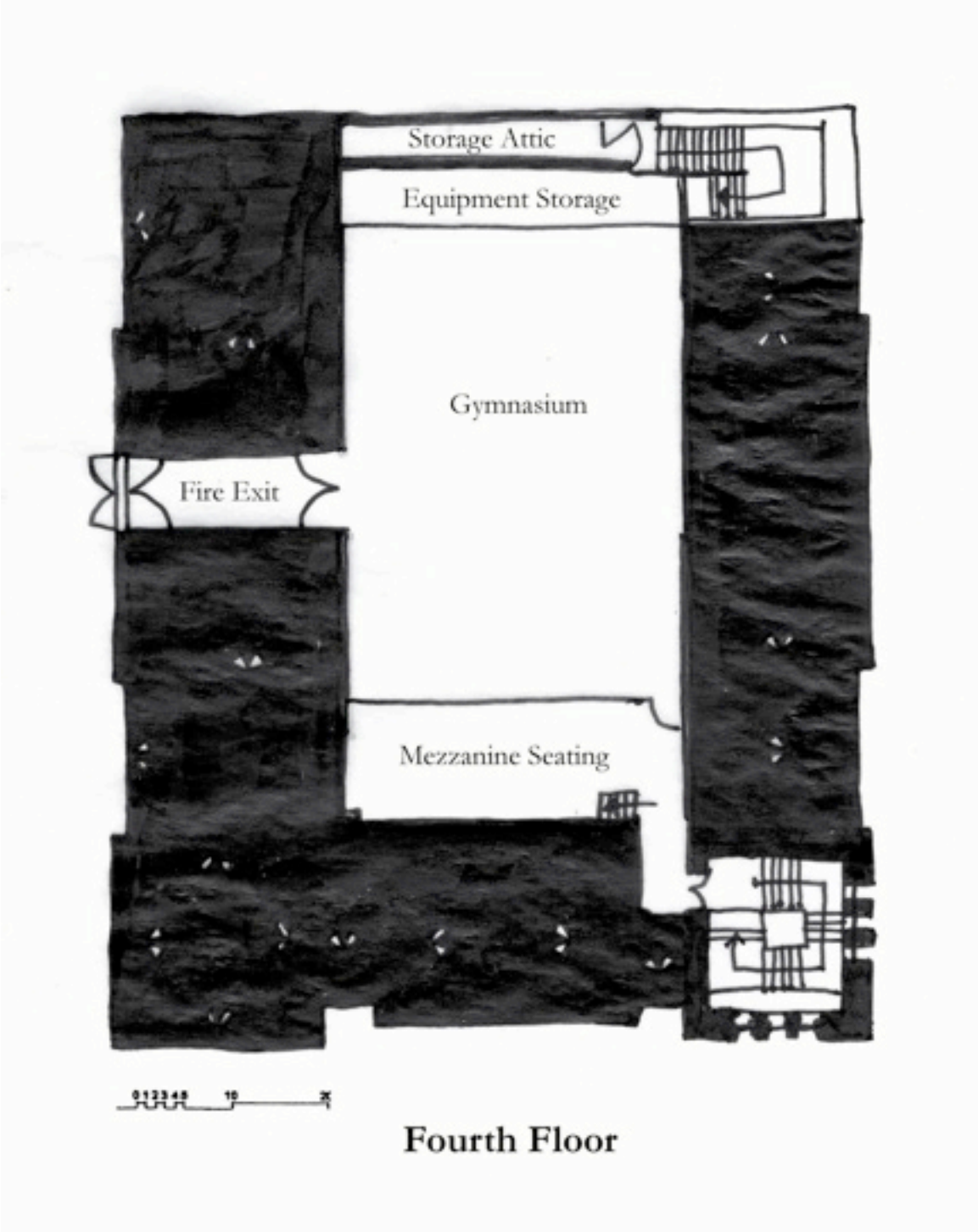

Figure 4. NCC, fourth floor.
Source: Based on information from Dorothy Williams, drawn by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 5. Front view of the NCC, April 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

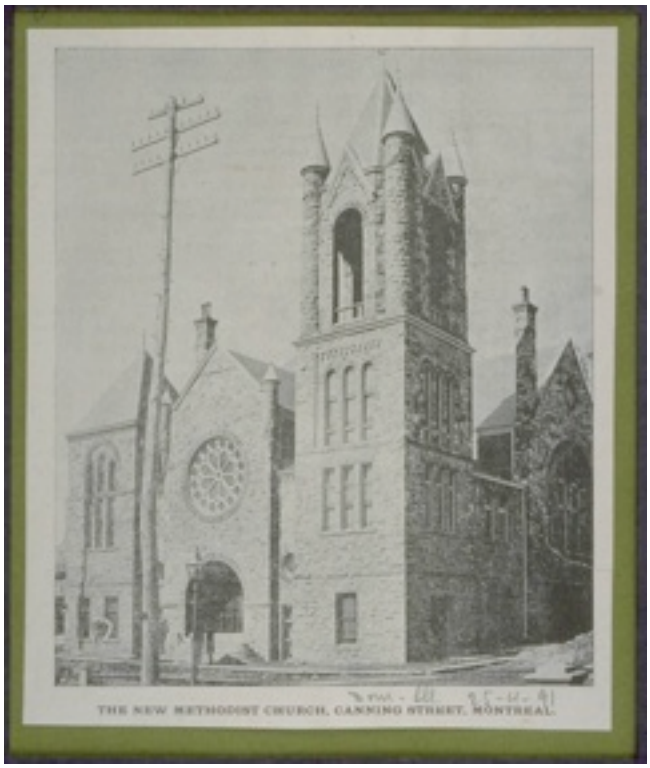

Figure 6. West End Methodist Church, 1891.
Source: *Albums de rues Massicotte.* Montreal: Bibliotheque et Archives Nationale du Quebec. http://bibnum2.banq.qc.ca/bna/massic/accueil.htm (accessed April 10, 2009).

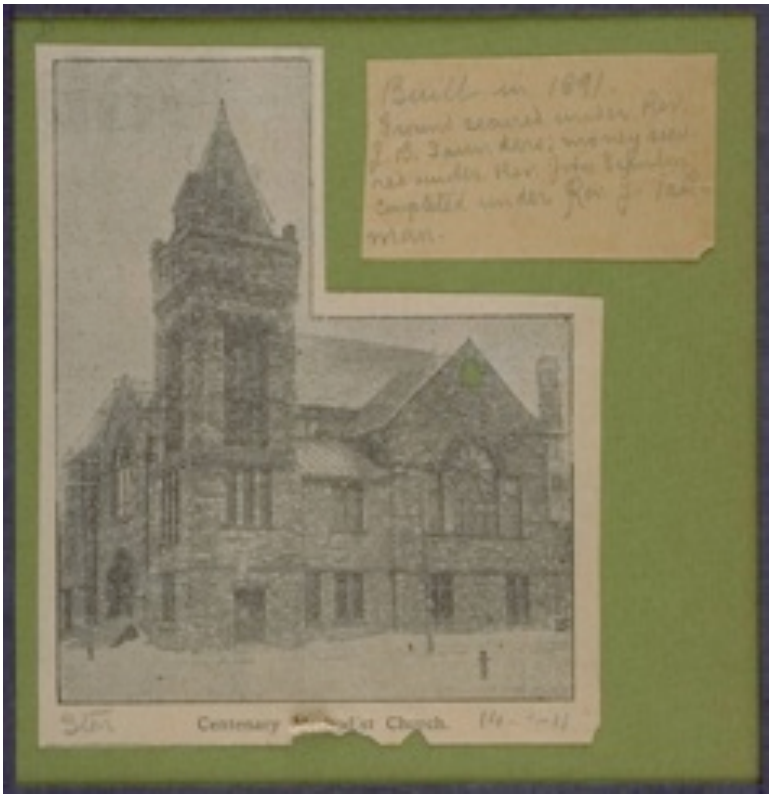

Figure 7. Centenary Methodist Church, 1911.
Source: *Albums de rues Massicotte.* Montreal: Bibliotheque et Archives Nationale du Quebec. http://bibnum2.banq.qc.ca/bna/massic/accueil.htm (accessed April 10, 2009).

Figure 8. West End Methodist Church, after the Christmas day fire, 1914.
Source: *Albums de rues Massicotte.* Montreal: Bibliotheque et Archives Nationale du Quebec. http://bibnum2.banq.qc.ca/bna/massic/accueil.htm (accessed April 10, 2009).

Figure 9. Sign above the front entrance, February 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 10. West side, February 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 11. East side, April 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 12. Reconstructed back wall, April 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 13. A tree growing behind the mesh on a west side window, April 2009. Photograph by Adrienne Connelly.

Figure 14. Inside the NCC.
Photograph by Ju ™. www.flikr.com/photos/julien-mercier/sets/72157617774818887 (accessed January 24, 2009).

Figure 15. Mural on the front door, February 2009.
Photograph by Adrienne Connelly

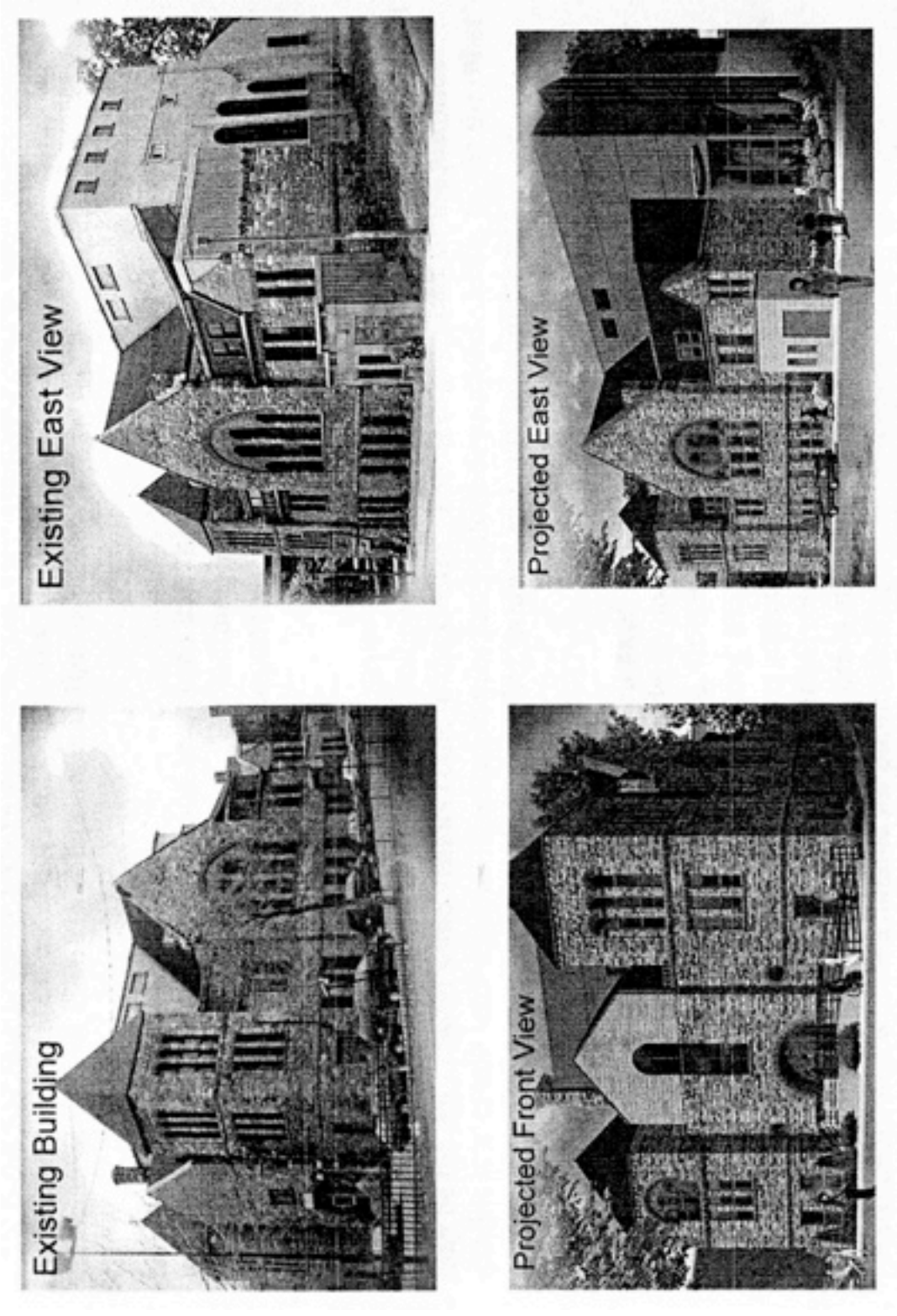

Figure 16. Projected views of the renovation of the NCC.
Source: NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. "Restoration, Renovation and Redevelopment of the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre," 2006.

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